Volume 9, Issue 01   Atari Online News, Etc.   January 5, 2007

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A-ONE #0901   01/05/07

  ~ RSS Feeds, Saving Time ~ People Are Talking!   ~ DGEM Bug Fixes!

  ~ Online Shopping Rises! ~ Game Parental Controls ~ MacWorld Rumors Fly!

~ Italy Blocks Kid Porn! ~ 2006 Top Five Hackers! ~ Gears of Wars Out!
~ Xbox 360 X-mas Victor! ~ Want Snow? Check eBay! ~ Mac Security Focus!

                    -* New Year Worm Makes Rounds! *-
                  -* Can-Spam Law Is Big Disappointment! *-
                -* Senators Introduce Net Tax Ban Extension! *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard   "Saying it like it is!"
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Well, here we are, in New England, and the weather feels like it's April.
We had a brief moment of winter with an inch of snow, but that disappeared
very quickly. This is the kind of winter that I can live with very easily!

So, how did you spend your New Year's Eve? If you're a nostalgia buff, you
probably tuned into Dick Clark, that ageless wonder. I did, but only for
the few minutes leading up to "the ball" dropping in Times Square. I guess
that's sort of a tradition for me. In the hours leading up to midnight, I
spend the time listening to some music - something loud and "rockin'" while
I have a few drinks. And my wife usually relaxes in front of the television
and hits the hay early. While this may not sound like typical New Years
revelry, it's relaxing, and safe. There are just too many nuts out on the
roads to make going out enjoyable and stress free.

Anyway, let's get to this week's issue. This is the first issue of the new
year - our NINTH year of publication. I can't believe that we're still here
and on a weekly basis. As I've mentioned many times in the past, it's
thanks to all of you, our dedicated readers, who make it all worthwhile. We
appreciate all of the support that you've provided us over the years.
Thanks!

Until next time...

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                    Bugfixes for DGEM : 1.0B

Bonsoir :)

Download on my homepage or directly in http://rajah.atari.org/files/
-> dgem10b.zip (1.8 MB) or
-> dfix10b.zip (150 KB) if you already have the 1.0 version

- bugfixes:
  - crash if poison cloud on monster
  - objects thrown and spell casts disappeared in the stairs
  - dying character disappeared also in the stairs

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        - redraw problem on characters positions in the party (after loading
          a saved game)
        - bad text display (memory problem after loading a saved game or
          another new game)
        - walking did not cost stamina as expected
        - memory corruption after cleaning jobs ('boot of speed' on first character)
    - more convenient mouse handling for characters positions changes
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Merci à Jean-Luc CECCOLI :)

Sorry for the inconvenience. Hope it will satisfy you.

Voilà !

-- Pierre TON-THAT - Rajah Lone / Renaissance
http://rajah.atari.org

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Miranda
joe@atarinews.org

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Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Fair warning, this is going to be a WAY
short column. There were a grand total of 41 messages in the newsgroup
this week. Forty one. I can remember when there were multiples of that
every day. Well, that was then and this is now, I guess.

Meanwhile, it's ten o'clock in the evening on a night in early January
here in the northeast, and it's FIFTY degrees outside! Aside from the
weather playing hell with my aching bones, I'm afraid that it's going
to cost us big-time not too far down the road. Have you any idea what
happens in the spring and summer when there was no snow to melt to fill
the wells and reservoirs? Yepper, the beginnings of a drought.

Believe me, I'm not yelling "the sky is falling" here, but we need to
start at least looking for ways to protect ourselves. It's all fine,
well and good to say that this may all be part of a natural cycle, but
that ain't gonna make wheat grow in the great Iowa-to-Kansas desert.
And we might have to start importing our papaya and kiwi fruit from
Gnome and Tanguska regardless of whether or not our carbon output has
anything to do with it.

Well, I'm not going to say any more on the matter, but it's just one of
those things that might not go away just because it'll be easier for
us.

Okay, let's get to the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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'Phantomm' asks about an internet app known as OASIS:

"Years ago, there was some work on a
version of OASIS above 1.35 that included Web
support.

I have some old e-mails from Oasis 2.11 or something
like that. Anyone know if any part of this Oasis did work?

I used Oasis 1.35 for along time for News and E-mail.
And still like it."

Martin Byttebier tells Phantomm:

"Oasis 2.x was just a piece of junk. I was one of the few registrated
users. There was no way I could make a connection to my ISP. The first
few weeks the authors were helping me but soon after that they
disappeared.

The newsreader itself was pretty good though.

I've used it a long time myself and I did like it. I found it better
then Newsie.

Now I'm using Okami but unfortunately I can't use Okami to post messages
as Newswatch can't cope with User authentication of my ISP.

To post I use Troll which does it's job but that's that. It's not that
powerful of Okami."

Jean-Franςois Lemaire asks Martin:

"How about CAT? That one seems quite complete, though maybe a bit too
hard to set up to my taste."

Martin replies:

"With Cat I've the same prob as with Newswatch. I can't connect to my
ISP. And yes it's rather hard to set up.
I've tried Cat out a few times (with another ISP) but IMHO it can't
replace Okami yet."

Greg Goodwin asks about using a <gasp> Amiga keyboard on an ST:

"Can anyone recall if people have gotten an Amiga 2000/3000 keyboard to
work on the Mega STe or TT030?

I really like the Amiga keyboard, and if I could get it to work on a
TT... that would be berries."

Daniel Mandic tells Greg:

"I have a Cherry Keyboard, going with my A2000."

Greg asks Daniel:

"You have that working on your ST? How did you get that to work? Are
the Amiga keyboard only PS/2 keyboards?"

Daniel tells Greg:

"No, I meant my AMIGA is outfitted with a 'Cherry' Brand Keyboard, my
favourite Keyboards also going with PC.

AMIGA Keyboard is DIN-Norm, AFAIK. Like the older Keyboard connector of
IBM-PC, before PS/2-Norm.

My TT is with the standard TT-Keyboard, not my favourite type (gum),
but fully cleaned and in proper working order.

I use more my PC Keyboard as you can see.

I think an IBM-PC Keyboard is the easier way for the TT. I heard about
PS/2 to TT adapter, Mouse and Keyboard."

Djordje Vukovic posts this about TeraDesk:

"Version 3.87 of TeraDesk open-source desktop for the 16-bit and 32-bit
lines of Atari computers are available at:

     http://solair.eunet.yu/~vdjole/teradesk.htm

This release brings several small enhancements, a number of bug fixes
and an improved hypertext manual. See the history file for more
information.

As several typing and formatting errors were found in the hypertext
manual after the release of this version, files at the home page of
TeraDesk have been updated and now contain the corrected manual.

There were no changes to the program itself. Sorry for the
inconvenience."

Our good friend and contributor, Tom (TJ) Andrews, asks about ethernet
and the MegaE:

"I just started receiving broadband Internet service through a deal just
too good to pass up, but it also means that I've canceled my dialup
account. I've been using my Mega STE to access Usenet from time to
time, but now that won't be possible unless I can hook up with an
Ethernet connection. I've been using versions of Sting and Newsie that
I installed years ago, with TOS 2.06 and ICD hard drive software. The
STE's internal HD is long gone, but I have two Syquest 200MB removable
drives instead. I'd really rather not get involved in installing
different HD software, if possible. But, if it's necessary I would at
least consider the idea.

In truth, there's nothing Internet-involved that I can do with the STE
that I can't do as well or better with my Linux or Windows PCs, but I
hate the idea of turning the old girl completely out to pasture just
yet. What's available these days to get me back on the Internet with my
STE?"

David Wade tells TJ:

"There are a few options. I have a couple of EtherNecs one I built
myself, and one Lyndon built. These were being sold by "Fuji_Man" on
eBay recently. Try sending him a message via e-bay to see if he has any
in stock. You can use those with Sting and Newsie. If you want to make
your own all the info is here:-

http://home.arcor.de/thomas.redelberger/prj/atari/etherne/index.htm

Pictures of mine are here :-

http://www.dwade.freeserve.co.uk/atari/main.html

If you have an ASCI port there is also info on using that there.

If you have a separate SCSI adaptor you could try a Dynaport or
Falleron. I am not sure if these will work with the Mega STE SCSI
adaptor. You would need HD Driver for those.

Lastly if you want to wait a little Lyndon is producing a combined USB
and Ethernet interface. Info here :-

http://hardware.atari.org/netusbee/netus.htm

check out the news links for up to date info."

Everyone's favorite techie, Alison, adds:

"There's also the 'free' dialup providers to consider. All you pay for
is the telephone call.

Another thing that might be an option, your broadband account may come
with a free dialup service.

Also, my host provider which has my website provides free IPv6 dialup to
it's customers."

TJ explains to Alison:

"My new provider is a small fixed wireless one-man company, providing
broadband to a rural area where availability has heretofore been
spotty. He doesn't provide dial-up, or newsgroups, as yet. Looking on
Google, there doesn't look like there's many free dial-up providers
left but NetZero. They say I would need to download software, and I
don't think they support Atari, either 8 or 16 bit. Or am I wrong
there?"

We'll have to wait until next week to see how TJ makes out. We're out of
time, out of room, and out of messages this week.

Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen
to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News   - The Latest Gaming News!
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        Console Wars: Xbox 360 Trumps Wii and PlayStation 3

Although Nintendo claimed a big victory in the opening battle of the
next-generation console wars, selling more than 600,000 of its Wii systems
in North America shortly after its launch date, new sales data indicates
that Microsoft's Xbox 360 actually won the holiday wars.

According to research firm NPD, Microsoft sold two million Xbox 360
consoles in the United States from the beginning of November through
Christmas Eve. Over the same period, Nintendo sold 1.8 million Wii
consoles, while Sony moved some 750,000 PlayStation 3 units.

However, the numbers might be a little misleading in terms of the overall
struggle for control of the multibillion dollar gaming market, according
to Michael Gartenberg, vice president and research director at Jupiter
Research.

One reason for the Microsoft victory has to do with the fact that both
Nintendo and Sony ran into supply problems in the days leading up to the
big holiday push, according to Gartenberg.

"It is not a surprise Microsoft sold more consoles," he said. "They had
more readily available. The real test will come when everyone is on equal
footing with regards to available units."

This 2006 holiday shopping season was expected to be the most competitive
showdown in gaming history, as the big three console makers all vied for
the top spot in the lucrative North American market. But problems arose
almost immediately.

While the Wii and the latest generation of PlayStation had only limited
numbers available, Microsoft's Xbox 360 first went on sale a year ago,
providing Redmond with ample time to work out any manufacturing kinks
that might have affected sales at the end of 2006.

However, all is not lost for the console makers that ran into

manufacturing problems, said Gartenberg, who predicted that any significant meaning to be derived from sales numbers won't come until at least after the 2007 holiday season.

"It is important for these companies to work out supply issues," said Gartenberg. "I'm sure more than a few gamers would have bought Wiis or PS3s, but just couldn't. It is a little premature for Microsoft to claim long-term victory."

Just in time for the last shopping push, Microsoft strategically extended the Xbox 360's warranty from 90 days to one year, providing its fan base with the same warranty length available with consoles from rivals Sony and Nintendo.

In a statement released just before Christmas, Microsoft said that, in addition to offering the warranty for new Xbox 360 purchases, it will offer the warranty as a retroactive option for those who have had to pay for out-of-warranty repairs that were made through official Microsoft channels.

Although the Xbox 360 led the way this holiday season, Sony remains the undisputed gaming champ with sales of the PlayStation and PlayStation 2.

However, analysts expect both Nintendo and Microsoft to mount a serious challenge to Sony's 60 percent stranglehold on the console market.

"In the end, there may not be one player that is dominant here," said Gartenberg. "It may end up being a pretty even split."

Parental Controls for Consoles

With all the buzz over the new Nintendo Wii and Sony PlayStation 3, there's been little mention of one new feature available in both game consoles: Tucked into the interface of each are content-filtering software tools designed to give parents control over whether their children can play violent video games.

Microsoft's Xbox 360, released last year, features the same sort of functionality. Like the PS3, the Xbox 360 is a multimedia device that allows users access to the Web and the ability to watch movies.

So the designers of those two devices included software that users can activate to make sure their children cannot watch R-rated movies or chat with strangers online.

For an industry with image problems stemming from violent content, some might find it surprising that Sony and Nintendo aren't doing more to publicize their parental control features. Packed with the box for the new PlayStation 3, for example, is a sheet of paper that explains the video game ratings system to parents - with ratings like ''E" (deemed suitable for ''everyone") or ''T" (for ''teen" audiences and up). But there's no mention of the parental ontrols, which automatically detect the rating for games and let parents determine if games in a certain category are available to their children.

Peter Dille, senior vice president of marketing at Sony Computer Entertainment America, said the parental controls on the PS3 were put in to ''future proof" the device for a day when, the company hopes, the PS3

is used widely in people's homes.

''We tried to anticipate everything this system will need for the next 10 years," he said. ''Most of the folks buying the system today are the hard-core early adopters who don't have kids in the house and aren't focused on that."

The Xbox 360, by contrast, has been on the market for a year and is now reaching for a more mainstream and family-oriented market. In a partnership with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America and Best Buy, the company has been offering to teach parents how to use the controls and understand the game industry's ratings system.

This isn't the first time electronics firms have incorporated content-filtering features, and it isn't the first time such features have gone largely unnoticed.

Some techies compare the new controls to the V-chip system built into TV sets. Since 2000, all televisions with screens larger than 13 inches sold in the United States have come with this device, designed to let parents filter programming.

Analyst Gary Arlen of the Bethesda, Md.-based research firm Arlen Communications, said the V-chip is rarely used. As for whether the parental-control settings built into game consoles have a better chance of catching on, he said it could go either way.

On the one hand, he said, today's parents are more tech-savvy and likely to explore a gadget's extra features. ''This generation of parents understands technology better than the parents who were around when the V-chip hit the market," he said.

On the other hand, Arlen wondered if today's generation of young parents - who grew up playing video games - will be less likely to worry about whether games are suitable entertainment for children and may be less likely to adjust the settings as a result.

Microsoft spokesman Aaron Greenberg said the company's studies show that slightly more than 10 percent of owners of the Xbox 360 are using the controls.

Game industry analysts say Microsoft has been the console maker most aggressively trying to spread the word about its content-filtering tools. And that's logical, they say - with the Xbox 360 on the market for over a year, Microsoft is now reaching out to a mainstream, family-oriented market to increase sales. The PlayStation 3, which has still sold only a few hundred thousand units so far, is still owned mainly by hard-core gamers - typically, young males.

''We have done everything we can to make these tools simple to use," said Greenberg, ''but we know that, at the end of the day, parents will have to be parents."

'Gears Of War' Breaks Out for Xbox

In what is expected to be another record-breaking year for the more than $10-billion-a-year video game industry, the breakout hit is a

science-fiction action game called Gears of War.

The game didn't sneak up on anyone - developer Epic Games and Microsoft
hyped it for nearly a year and a half leading up to its release Nov. 12 -
but the futuristic sci-fi combat game has overcome an industry hurdle in
establishing a new intellectual property as a hit.

It's not easy to compete in the marketplace with Mario, Madden and other
established franchises.

Gears of War has sold more than 1 million copies in the USA and an
estimated 2 million copies worldwide, making it the best-selling game for
Microsoft's year-old Xbox 360 video game system.

Well reviewed by critics, the game is reaping year-end awards. GameSpot
named Gears of War the game of the year, along with best shooter game,
best multiplayer game and best graphics (technical).

Last month, it lost game of the year to The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion at
the Spike TV Game Awards but won studio of the year (for Epic Games), best
graphics, best shooter and best multiplayer game.

"Gears of War is certainly one of the best games of the year," says Geoff
Keighley, video game journalist and host of Spike TV's Game Head. "It's
beautiful, engrossing and features very polished gameplay. It's the kind
of game you want to show off to the friends. I dare say it's one of the
first true next-generation games on the market."

More important, Gears of War (Microsoft, $60 and $70 for a collector's
edition with an art book and DVD) provided a boost for Microsoft's game
system at a time when much of the industry attention was focused on the
launch of the competing Sony PlayStation 3 and Nintendo Wii systems.

"It's no doubt sold a lot of Xbox 360s and has made existing 360 owners
feel very good about their investment," says John Davison, editorial
director of Ziff Davis Media's game group, including Electronic Gaming
Monthly.

"It came at exactly the right time and has proved to be a great counter
to the launch of the PS3."

At Newsweek, general editor for technology N'Gai Croal is withholding his
verdict on whether Gears of War can be a "system seller" that
significantly increases the base of Xbox 360 owners, which rose about
511,000 in November to 3.4 million.

But he will say, "Microsoft can hold up Gears of War and say, 'Sony says
their machine is more powerful than ours, yet we have this game that looks
better (than any PS3 games).' "

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                      A-ONE's Headline News
                 The Latest in Computer Technology News
                     Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

New Year Worm Makes the Rounds

This time, the latest threat to your inbox - and to corporate networks around the world - bears an aptly timed subject line. The Luder worm, also called Trojan downloader Tibs-jy or simply the Happy New Year worm, arrives with "Happy 2007" or "Fun Filled New Year" or any one of a dozen similar greetings in the subject line.

It also arrives with a dangerous payload, an attachment most often named "Postcard.exe" or "Greeting Card.exe." The attachment also can appear as a Zip file, but either way, it's not an attachment you want to open. According to antivirus firm Sophos, the Happy New Year worm will turn off your antivirus software, then send itself to everyone in your contact list.

It might also download malicious software and even install itself in your system's registry, the master database that Windows uses to keep track of files and system settings.

Of course, sending a virus through e-mail - and one that spreads itself by asking users to open a clearly marked executable file - is a threat nearly as old as e-mail itself, and one that most users should know of by now.

But according to Andrew Braunberg, senior analyst and security expert at research firm Current Analysis, it's not ignorance but bad timing that could lead most users to unwittingly infect their machines.

"Let's chalk it up to one too many eggnogs," he said. "A lot of people are coming back into the office and they've got hundreds of e-mails they're going through." As a result, they don't give each item the care - and sharpeye - they normally would, he added.

That's mixed news for antivirus experts and I.T. departments who hope that end users have gotten wise to hackers' basic ploys after years of e-mail threats and the near-constant barrage of reports that makes terms like "Love Bug" and "phishing" household words.

"If you quizzed the general population, they'd say, 'Of course I'd never do that,'" said Braunberg. "But I think if you catch people at the wrong time - people are just buried - they're not paying attention, and they're not being as careful as they should be."

As basic as it is, the Happy New Year worm might not be the norm for 2007, as hackers, phishers, spammers, and malware writers of every stripe sharpen their tools for another year of mischief.

Indeed, today's attacks are harder to detect than ever before - and harder to defend against. Take spam, formerly easy to screen simply by filtering for keywords like "Viagra" or "low-interest mortgage."

Today we have image spam, in which advertisements are embedded in graphics that elude antispam software that can only scan text. And because graphics chew up more bandwidth than text, image spam clogs networks and wastes hard drive space even more quickly than its precursors.

So what's ahead in 2007? Only time will tell, of course. But this much is certain: Hackers are alive and well, and likely will do their best to

spin their nefarious code to wreak all sorts of havoc this year and well into the future.

Online Spending Tops $100 Billion in 2006

Driven by a strong rise in holiday spending, U.S. retail Web sites collected $102.1 billion in 2006, marking a 24 percent increase over last year, according to a report released today.

Holiday shoppers spent $24.6 billion between Novembers 1 and December 31, 2006, a rise of 26 percent over 2005, according to the report from comScore Networks.

The numbers include consumer spending in all sectors except travel. Spending jumped in the last two months of the year, pushing the total over $100 billion for the first time, said Gian Fulgoni, comScore chairman.

Without the need to visit brick-and-mortar shops in person, online shoppers spread their spending over a longer period. The Monday after Thanksgiving is traditionally one of the heaviest shopping days of the year for U.S. retailers, but in 2006 it was just another day. The $607.6 million spent on "Cyber Monday," November 27, was surpassed on 11 other days before the end of the year.

By delaying their shopping until the last days before winter holidays, shoppers showed their growing trust in online retailers' ability to ship goods through the mail quickly, the report said. The top three days of online spending for the year were December 13 ($666.9 million), December 11 ($660.8 million), and December 4 ($647.5 million).

Senators Introduce 'Net Tax Ban

Three U.S. senators have introduced a bill to permanently extend a ban on taxes unique to the Internet, such as access taxes.

Democrat Ron Wyden of Oregon, Republican John McCain of Arizona and Republican John Sununu of New Hampshire introduced the Permanent Internet Tax Freedom Act Thursday, the first day of business for the new U.S. Congress. The bill, in addition to permanently banning taxes on Internet access, would prohibit states from taxing online purchases if they don't also tax catalog or phone-based sales.

If Congress does not extend the ban, consumers could face significant increases in the cost of Internet service, Wyden said in a statement. "Why should a product that's not taxed on the street or taxed in a store be taxed on the Internet?" Wyden said. "It's unfair, anticompetitive and would greatly harm one of the booming sectors of our economy."

Congress first passed a temporary ban on taxes that target the Internet in 1998, and has extended the ban twice. The current moratorium expires in November.

But a group of senators objected to a permanent ban on Internet-only taxes after the House of Representatives approved one in late 2003. The senators,

a group of former state governors, said the House version banned taxes on voice communications and would hurt state budgets. The Senate, in late 2004, passed a temporary moratorium that allowed states to collect traditional telephone taxes on newer VOIP (voice over Internet Protocol) service.

McCain and Sununu also cosponsored a bill, along with two other Republican senators, that would place a three-year moratorium on new and "discriminatory" taxes on mobile phone services. Many municipalities tax mobile services at rates two to three times higher than sales taxes, according to McCain's office.

McCain tried to add a similar amendment to a broadband bill that failed to pass last year. The Internet tax band would "ensure that consumers never have to pay a toll when they access the information highway," McCain said in a statement. "Keeping Internet access affordable to all Americans is a worthy policy goal."

The Information Technology Association of America (ITAA) and the United States Telecom Association, both trade groups, praised the bill to permanently ban Internet-only taxes. "Stacking the deck against e-commerce is stacking the deck against growth and prosperity," Phil Bond, ITAA's president and chief executive, said in a statement.

Can-Spam Law 'Big Disappointment'

As the federal Can-Spam Act nears its third anniversary, a spam researcher calls it a "big disappointment" and says it hasn't been a deterrent to junk e-mailers, who have stepped up their efforts in the last few months to flood inboxes with an unprecedented volume of spam.

"Can-Spam has provided more prosecutorial teeth, but it hasn't had a huge deterrent effect," says Scott Chasin, the chief technology officer of MX Logic.

"It's been a fairly big disappointment."

To be fair, Chasin says, Can-Spam was never meant to stop spam, only regulate it. But even at that job, the law has been a dismal failure. According to MX Logic's data, no more than 7% of all spam was ever compliant with the legislation's requirements. And that was within the act's first year. This year, compliance ran at all-time lows, never once reaching 1%.

"It's just another reminder that the legislative leg is not having a lot of impact," Chasin says.

Anti-spam researchers - Chasin included - have watched as spam volumes jumped in October, then soared again in November. Spammers haven't looked back since.

"[Spam] traffic has doubled or in some cases even quadrupled," says Chasin.

IronPort, an MX Logic rival in the e-mail security market, recently said that the amount of spam increased by 35% in November over October, and doubled in the 12 months ending in October 2006.

Can-Spam never was equipped to stop the flood of junk mail, says Chasin, who adds that its approach has been made moot by an explosion in botnets, collections of compromised PCs that spammers use to send billions of unwanted e-mail messages a month.

In fact, Chasin is pessimistic about efforts to control or even contain the rising tide of spam. He scoffs at calls to cut off botnets from spammers, and calls such proposals unrealistic. "We don't even know what we're dealing with.

The [botnet] detection capabilities are rudimentary at best. And now we're encountering polymorphic 'queen bots' that understand antivirus engines and exploit the signature release windows of [antivirus] vendors. It makes detection very difficult."

Queen bots can easily reconfigure themselves, often on the fly, as they seed a new victim PC, escaping detection by the reactive antivirus companies that must create and distribute a new signature, or fingerprint, for each morphed version of the bot.

The only way to stem the rapidly rising volume of spam, says Chasin, is for Internet service providers to wall off systems by refusing to allow computers obviously owned by consumers to send massive amounts of junk mail. Such PCs are almost always bot-controlled.

"It's got to come down to containment," says Chasin, who recognizes that there are problems with the practice, including privacy issues. "I think the focus [in 2007] will shift from Microsoft and back to ISPs."

Even so, he has low expectations for a solution any time soon. Although Bill Gates' infamous promise in January 2004 that "two years from now, spam will be solved" has been relegated to the technology equivalent of "Dewey Defeats Truman!" the war against spam will be long and hard.

"That was simply wishful thinking," says Chasin. "We're going to be dealing with spam for some time. We're going to be reactive, that's what the security industry does.

"We have a long way to go."

Italy Enacts Law To Block Child Porn Web Sites

Italy has introduced a new law requiring Internet service providers to block child pornography Web sites within six hours of being told to do so, the communications ministry said on Tuesday.

The decree, which comes into force almost immediately, requires Internet providers to set up a system that blocks child pornography Web sites from being viewed soon after the providers are notified of their existence.

"The decree reinforces the fight against child pornography and the exploitation of minors through the Internet," Communications Minister Paolo Gentiloni said in a statement.

Italy's penal code includes severe punishment for the distribution and publication of child pornography.

Untangle The World Wide Web With RSS

"RSS" is one of the coolest things you've never heard of when it comes to the Internet.

Short for "Really Simple Syndication," a name that seems designed to induce maximum eye glazing, RSS is in fact one of the best time-savers online. And it's getting easier to use.

RSS is a way for Web surfers to keep up with the latest news or catch hot deals on travel packages, concert tickets and nearly anything else people use the Internet to buy.

Instead of typing in 20 different Web site addresses every time you want to see what's new on washingtonpost.com, craigslist.org or your cousin's blog, just get "RSS feeds." Every time a page updates, you get an alert.

Media blogger Jeff Jarvis is one of the converted.

"I don't use bookmarks at all, ever," said Jarvis, who offers RSS as a way to read his blog at Buzzmachine.com. "If a site doesn't have RSS, I find it a great irritant."

RSS comes in handy in a variety of everyday situations, said Forrester analyst Charlene Li.

"I'm currently looking for tickets for The Jersey Boys," she said. "And it's completely sold out. But every once in a while something shows up on Craigslist."

Instead of constantly checking Craigslist, Li sets up an RSS feed searching for four tickets, and if someone posts an ad for tickets, the feed will alert her.

So, why are so few people using it?

Only 2 percent of online consumers bother, according to Forrester, and more than half of that group is 40 years old or younger.

For starters, the name is deadly for attracting "average" Internet users - people who use the Web and handle e-mail, but quail at inscrutabilities like "service-oriented architecture" and "robust enterprise solutions."

Then there are the orange buttons you find on Web pages. Clicking one produces a jumble of computer codes. It's hardly the path to popularity.

"RSS is a horrible name," said Li. "And those little orange buttons don't do anybody any favors."

People often do not realize that the computer code is useless. What they must do is copy the Web address in their browser, and insert it into their RSS reader.

The lack of clear instructions on many Web sites dooms the service to obscurity.

Some of the top U.S. news Web sites are changing that, including The New

York Times site.

The site's managers plan to offer readers feeds dedicated to topics, reporters and columnists sometime in the first half of 2007, but in an easier way. "Once we start doing that, you won't get that very geeky screen," said Robert Larson, nytimes.com's vice president of product management and development. "It should be incredibly easy for anybody, no matter what their technical level, to click a button and add a feed to their MyTimes page," he said.

Washingtonpost.com is sprucing up its RSS system for sometime in early 2007, said Ann Marchand Thompson, the site's editor for discussions, e-mail and RSS. "We want to let people sign up for the news that they want to receive without having to feel like they need a technical background to do it," she said. "They don't need to know the code behind it."

Getting RSS going on your computer is also simpler today. The two easiest ways are using newer version of the Internet Explorer and Firefox browsers, which contain RSS readers.

Yahoo and Google also offer easy-to-use RSS options. Specialized RSS readers like Bloglines and Newsgator are slightly more sophisticated and take a little more experimentation, but are tough to put down once you get the hang of them.

                        Apple Macworld Rumors in Full Swing

As Apple prepares for the upcoming Macworld conference, the blogosphere is already buzzing with speculation about what this year's announcements might bring.

Apple CEO Steve Jobs has demonstrated an inclination to unveil major new technologies and deals at Macworld, but some analysts have questioned whether 2007 can yield the type of large-scale rollouts on par with the iPod, the iTunes store, or Mac OS X.

Not surprisingly, the company has posted a major teaser on its site: "The first 30 years were just the beginning. Welcome to 2007." As in years past, Apple is offering no indication about any technology or product news, leaving it to the Mac faithful and others to build the buzz.

Although Apple is adept at keeping its announcements under tight wraps leading up to Macworld, there are some developments that are likely to occur, Apple observers have noted.

The company's line of iApps, for example, usually garner a Macworld mention with updated features and functions. The application suite includes iLife and iWork, and rumors abound that Apple might finally fold in a spreadsheet to compete with Microsoft's Excel program.

Other Apple technology is also due for a revamp, including the Mac Mini, and possibly the Mac Pro, the company's desktop Mac. Both could get stronger processors through Apple's work with Intel.

One major announcement that is expected to come out of Macworld is Apple's plans for iTV, a concept that was introduced by Jobs in September but was not detailed. At that time, Jobs mentioned that iTV would be

available in the first quarter of 2007.

From Jobs' comments, some bloggers have posited that iTV might be a device that allows users to broadcast content purchased from iTunes onto their TV sets.

If Apple really does try to conquer the living room in this way, it will definitely be a battle worth watching, noted Yankee Group analyst Adi Kishore. "In the consumer electronics world, there are many products coming out that claim to be a bridge between the TV and the computer," he said. "It's a huge trend."

Apple has an advantage through its brand recognition, Kishore added, but it is likely to find some fierce competition from cable TV providers, not fellow software and computer makers.

"Companies like Comcast and Time Warner are already in the home, and control the TV as well as broadband service, so they're going to try and add services," he said. "Apple could look better thanks to a more intuitive interface, but we'll just have to see how it plays out."

Five Hackers Who Left a Mark on 2006

In the security year that was 2006, zero-day attacks and exploits dominated the headlines.

However, the year will be best remembered for the work of members of the hacking er, security research community who discovered and disclosed serious vulnerabilities in the technologies we take for granted, forced software vendors to react faster to flaw warnings and pushed the vulnerability research boat into new, uncharted waters.

In no particular order, here's my list of five hackers who left a significant mark on 2006 and set the stage for more important discoveries in 2007:

H.D. Moore

H.D. Moore has always been a household name, and a bit of a rock star, in hacker circles. As a vulnerability researcher and exploit writer, he built the Metasploit Framework into a must-use penetration testing tool. In 2006, Moore reloaded the open-source attack tool with new tricks to automate exploitation through scripting, simplify the process of writing an exploit, and increase the re-use of code between exploits.

Moore's public research also included the MoBB (Month of Browser Bugs) project that exposed security flaws in the world's most widely used Web browsers; a malware search engine that used Google search queries to find live malware samples; the MoKB (Month of Kernel Bugs) initiative that uncovered serious kernel-level flaws; and the discovery of Wi-Fi driver bugs that could cause code execution attacks.

Love him or hate him, hackers marvel at his skills while software vendors decry his stance on vulnerability disclosure, Moore's work nudged the security discussion to the mainstream media and confirmed that vulnerability research will remain alive in 2007.

Jon "Johnny Cache" Ellch and David Maynor

At the Black Hat Briefings in Las Vegas, Jon "Johnny Cache" Ellch teamed up with former SecureWorks researcher David Maynor to warn of exploitable flaws in wireless device drivers. The presentation triggered an outburst from the Mac faithful and an ugly disclosure spat that still hasn't been fully resolved.

For Ellch and Maynor, the controversy offered a double-edged sword. In many ways, they were hung out to dry by Apple and SecureWorks, two companies that could not manage the disclosure process in a professional manner. In some corners of the blogosphere, they were unfairly maligned for mentioning that the Mac was vulnerable.

However, security researchers who understood the technical nature, and severity, of their findings, Ellch and Maynor were widely celebrated for their work, which was the trigger for the MoKB (Month of Kernel Bugs) project that launched with exploits for Wi-Fi driver vulnerabilities.

Since the Black Hat talk, a slew of vendors, including Broadcom, D-Link, Toshiba and Apple, have shipped fixes for the same class of bugs identified by Ellch and Maynor, confirming the validity of their findings.

Maynor has since moved on, leaving SecureWorks to launch Errata Security, a product testing and security consulting startup.

Mark Russinovich

Before Mark Russinovich's mind-blowing expose of Sony BMG's use of stealth technology in a DRM (digital rights management) scheme, "rootkit" was a techie word. Now, the word is being used in marketing material for every anti-virus vendor, cementing Russinovich's status as a Windows internals guru with few equals.

The Sony rootkit discovery highlighted the fact that anti-virus vendors were largely clueless about the threat from stealth malware and forced security vendors to build anti-rootkit scanners into existing products.

Russinovich, who now works at Microsoft after Redmond acquired Sysinternals, spent most of 2006 expanding on his earlier rootkit warnings and building new malware hunting tools and utilities.

Joanna Rutkowska

Polish researcher Joanna Rutkowska also used the spotlight of the 2006 Black Hat Briefings to showcase new research into rootkits and stealthy malware. In a standing-room-only presentation, she dismantled the new driver-signing mechanism in Windows Vista to plant a rootkit on the operating system and also introduced the world to "Blue Pill," a virtual machine rootkit that remains "100 percent undetectable," even on Windows Vista x64 systems.

In 2006, Rutkowska also pinpointed inherent weaknesses in anti-virus software; warned that the major operating system vendors are not yet ready for hardware virtualization technology and confirmed fears that stealth malware in the operating system's biggest security threat.

Researchers Focus on Mac Security

Two security experts have announced that they will be spending January publicizing flaws in Apple's OS X operating system, beginning with reports of a serious vulnerability in the QuickTime media player that affects both Macs and Windows PCs.

Noting that their work was not driven by malice, researcher Kevin Finisterre and hacker LMH told news sources that they aim to highlight problems to make OS X, and the programs that run on the system, more secure.

Another desired effect will be to create a more security-aware user base, the researchers have stated. The team also claims to want better practices from Apple in terms of patching flaws and eradicating bugs.

Previously, Finisterre and LMH have done similar work focusing on revealing vulnerabilities in Web browsers and other operating systems.

Finisterre, founder of security startup Digital Munition, has noted in the past that he "loves" Mac hardware, but does not care for the machine's operating system. His preference, he has stated, is to run Linux on a Mac computer.

The researcher has found vulnerabilities in Mac OS X in the past, and said that e-mails sent to Apple went unanswered, a situation he found personally frustrating.

Soon after starting the recent Mac project - dubbed the Month of Apple Bugs - on January 1, Finisterre and LMH discovered a flaw in Apple's QuickTime video software, and the way it handles certain media protocols.

The bug reportedly lets hackers exploit QuickTime's Real Time Streaming (RTS) protocol to cause a buffer overflow. A buffer overflow is simply a problem that occurs when a program, such as QuickTime, attempts to store too much data in the space allotted for it, and can give hackers complete control over a computer.

The QuickTime flaw can be triggered through HTML, JavaScript, and QuickTime files, making its vector - that is, the method through which the flaw is exploited - a common one indeed. It also affects all versions of QuickTime, including the most recent, 7.1.3, on both Macs and Windows machines.

Security firm Secunia has rated the flaw "highly critical." To avoid it, users can uninstall QuickTime or disable RTS.

The researchers have acknowledged that the project has the potential to make life more difficult for Mac users, because malicious hackers will be clued in to software flaws that could be exploited.

But a wake up call is needed, according to the pair, because many Mac users have a tendency to think of their systems as bulletproof, even when vulnerabilities are announced. Other security researchers, however, are not so sure that Apple deserves the glaring attention proposed by Finisterre and LMH.

"It would be unfair, in our opinion, to say that Apple is any worse than other software developers in responding to these issues," said Graham Cluley, a senior technology consultant at Sophos. "They have always seemed

prepared to be open with their customer base about known issues and how to resolve them."

He added that Apple has built systems into OS X to make automatic downloading and updating of patches simple for users rather than requiring them to visit a site and download the fix by hand.

"It's hard to compare different operating systems when it comes to vulnerabilities, as all OSs have suffered to a lesser or greater extent," Cluley said. "Apple vulnerabilities are not unusual, and the company appears to be well placed to deliver important security fixes to its users on a regular basis."

                     Colorado Woman Selling Snow On eBay

Call it a winter sale. Jim and Mary Walker are selling snow on eBay. Starting bids were holding steady Friday at 99 cents for samples from "Blizzard I and Blizzard II."

The Walkers got the idea for selling snow after shoveling mounds from two storms a week apart that together dumped more than 4 feet along the Front Range.

"I figured eBay has ghosts and all sorts of weird stuff, so why not snow?" said Mary Walker, who teaches business workshops on employee communications.

How much snow 99 cents or whatever the winning bid gets depends. Walker's auction notice suggests avoiding shipping and handling charges by stopping by their home and picking it up, in a dump truck.

Only 10 offerings of snow are available and the proceeds are earmarked for a used snowblower for Jim or a pair of shovels.

She says she doesn't really expect to find a buyer for their blizzard overstock.

"We just wanted to just give some folks a laugh," she said.

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